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Other-ing: Creating a Three-Dimensional Asian American Perspective

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B.F.A Thesis

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Abstract

Through my thesis body of work “Other-ing,” my goal is to create a three-dimensional Asian American perspective. As a result of Western standards implemented as the norm, where colonialism is still prevalent and white still reigns supreme, the media has created an onslaught of fictional Asian characters to control this group. Representations, tropes, stereotypes have long shaped the Asian American community, so much so that it is often easier to understand these one-dimensional depictions rather than the complex reality of how an Asian American defines themselves. Not shying away from implicating myself in this systematic structure of racism, I become both the oppressed and the oppressor, showcasing the complicated, multi-layered nature of being human, of being Asian American.

Introduction

It is essential to understand how embedded Western principles are to even touch the surface of race, in modern day America. Europeans have long made it clear how white skin is superior. Enlightenment thinkers once believed that all the races were separate, that people of color came from a different human family, one that was more savage, uncivilized, and barbarous (Yale). Then there's Social Darwinism, Eugenics, the Ku Klux Klan, Donald Trump, do I need to even go on? White still reigns supreme today.

In this paper, I will argue that as a result of Western standards implemented as the norm, the Asian American community has been understood as one-dimensional. Through my new body of work called "Other-ing," my goal is to depict the Asian American experience through my own eyes as three dimensional, as experiences that are multi-faceted, layered, and complex. I become both the oppressed and the oppressor in "Other-ing," however by actively implicating myself, the Asian American community, and the audience through my current developing body of work, I believe that Western standards can be one step closer to being dismantled, creating a system of equality rather than hierarchy.

Branded

In complete darkness, a little yellow speck glows. The spec begins to move across the screen – gliding. Murmurs of a voice, lost in the wind, are heard but the exact words that punctuate the phrase have yet to reveal themselves. As the film continues, the little, yellow speck weaves through the darkness getting closer and also simultaneously larger and larger.

As the film continues, the speck transforms into an object, a person, a woman. The woman carries a yellow neon sign. The sign spells FOREIGNER. In the middle of the film the murmurs become clear. The performer repeats, “I am not a foreigner,” over and over and over again.

As the piece escalates, and the woman comes closer to the camera, the movements and statement get more frantic, hurried, distressed. The voice becomes so loud that it screams at the dark, barren landscape and moments of hysteria burst forward, raw emotion becoming palpable.

The film finishes as the performer carries her glowing neon FOREIGNER sign off the screen, still yelling into the void that “I AM NOT A FOREIGNER.” In a sense, the performance never ending.

This work is called *Are you listening to me?* and I am the performer.



Figure 1 & 2: Caroline Yoo, *Are you listening to me?*, 2017, Short film

In 1995, I was born in Lawrence, Kansas as Caroline Yoo. I was raised in the United States and English is my primary language, yet my Korean heritage and my Asian physical attributes are what define me in the United States. The Korean/Asian stamp of foreign-ness, available to others through my yellow skin and slanted dark brown eyes, has been seared into my flesh like a cattle branding tattoo or a large neon sign that spells out clearly F-O-R-E-I-G-N-E-R.

Frank H. Wu, said it best in *Yellow*, that for Asian Americans the “fictional character becomes more believable than a real person...” (Wu 8). The media massively underrepresents Asians and Asian Americans and yet when it does represent these communities, the media does so in one-dimensional way:

“tattoos of dragons entangled around Chinese ideograms..., Feng-shui consultants...miniature Zen gardens...adorn offices...Japanese animations becomes a staple of mainstream children’s television....henna(mehndi) is copied by rock stars such as Madonna, who are then copied by adolescent white girls...” (Wu 7).

The Asian American or Asian becomes easier to understand through fictitious portrayals rather than in real life. Asian Americans are rarely allowed the authority to identify themselves but rather are subject to being viewed through representations.

Are you listening to me? is focused exactly on unhinging those tropes that have categorized me as un-American through the media. It is a piece focused on dismantling our norms of power and authority, which have created a society where the other must bow down to the greater. Society, authority, power have all been personified in my performance as the darkness, as the barren landscape. No matter how much I yell at the world that “I am not a foreigner,” no one is listening, no one is responding.

The extent of the otherness that Asian Americans often feel can be understood by drawing parallels to philosopher Michel Foucault's theories on controlling society in his "Panopticism."

Foucault begins by introducing how European society functioned under the plague. The plague stricken town model became a society of "confusion and disorder," (Foucault 2) where the plague was "an extraordinary evil," (Foucault 5) which created more control of power for the authorities. The authority figures began to exercise dominance by "binary division and branding" like identifying one as "mad/sane, dangerous/harmless, normal/abnormal" (Foucault 2). Thus the people who were deemed as plague-victims, the abnormal ones, were then supervised in order to "correct" or "alter" him/herself (Foucault 3).

In ways Asia is the plague. Asia is the "extraordinary evil," needed for authority figures to command society even more. People in the United States do not differentiate between Asians, Asian Americans, and Asia. As a result, people of Asian descent living in the United States become the plague-victims. Asia is the abnormal, the dangerous, the mad and consequently descendants of the continent are deemed as such too. For example in the 1998 Olympics, MS-NBC published a headline announcing that "American beats out Kwan" after Tara Lipinsky won gold while Michelle Kwan placed second (Wu 21). The title was offensive because Michelle Kwan is an American citizen and was a figure skater for team USA, just like Tara Lipinsky.

However because of being branded as plague victims, Asians in the U.S. began to acculturate themselves, ridding themselves of certain cultural tendencies that were too Asian. Using Foucault's notions, people from Asia living in the United States began to "correct" or "alter" themselves to be viewed as normal, sane, harmless. Asians in America began to speak "perfect English, effortlessly practic[ed] mainstream cultural values, and even marr[ied]

members of the dominant group to help reduce this ‘otherness,’” (Zhou 132). They adapted to mainstream American society, which “pressures all immigrants to ‘fit in,’ and ‘not rock the boat’” (Zhou 124).

Moreover, the Asian-American experience is further paralleled to Foucault’s ideas of visibility as control in society. The correction of plague victims takes place in the Panopticon, the architectural structure in which schools, hospitals, jails, mental facilities are based on (Foucault 2). The structure functions on visibility as a “trap,” as it allows for the abnormal to be always watched without the authority figure in place as well as for inmates to police each other. In modern day America, visibility of one-dimensional Asian American in mass media is essential to keeping this population repressed. Through these one-dimensional Asian character visibilities, the Asian American community can be understood and belittled through stereotypes rather than reality. Modern day Asian-Americans do not have the control to define themselves but through their portrayals are they constantly other-fied and stuck in the branding of abnormal; forever the foreigner.

Oppressor

“Other-ing,” is not only a body of work this is focusing on the methods in which the Asian American community has not only been oppressed but also explores how the same community has also become the oppressor. In my current work-in-progress short film, *해님달님*, roughly translated to “the sun and the moon,” inspired by the well-known Korean folklore with the same name, I have refabricated this bedtime story to explore topics of selective discrimination in the Korean American community. My fictional story if taken at full frontal value is extremely racist and even at the end, the moral of the story is that white supremacy is real and that the Korean American protagonists are happy to be oppressed by people of paler skin as long as they have a better hierarchical ranking than anyone who has darker skin. It is not a happy ending. Yet, the purpose of this story is to depict how growing up in Korean American communities, this anti-blackness is embedded in the childhood experience. Learning these values of selective racism and discrimination is almost like reading a fairytale book at night – instilled by your elders in a manner that is not even noticeable.

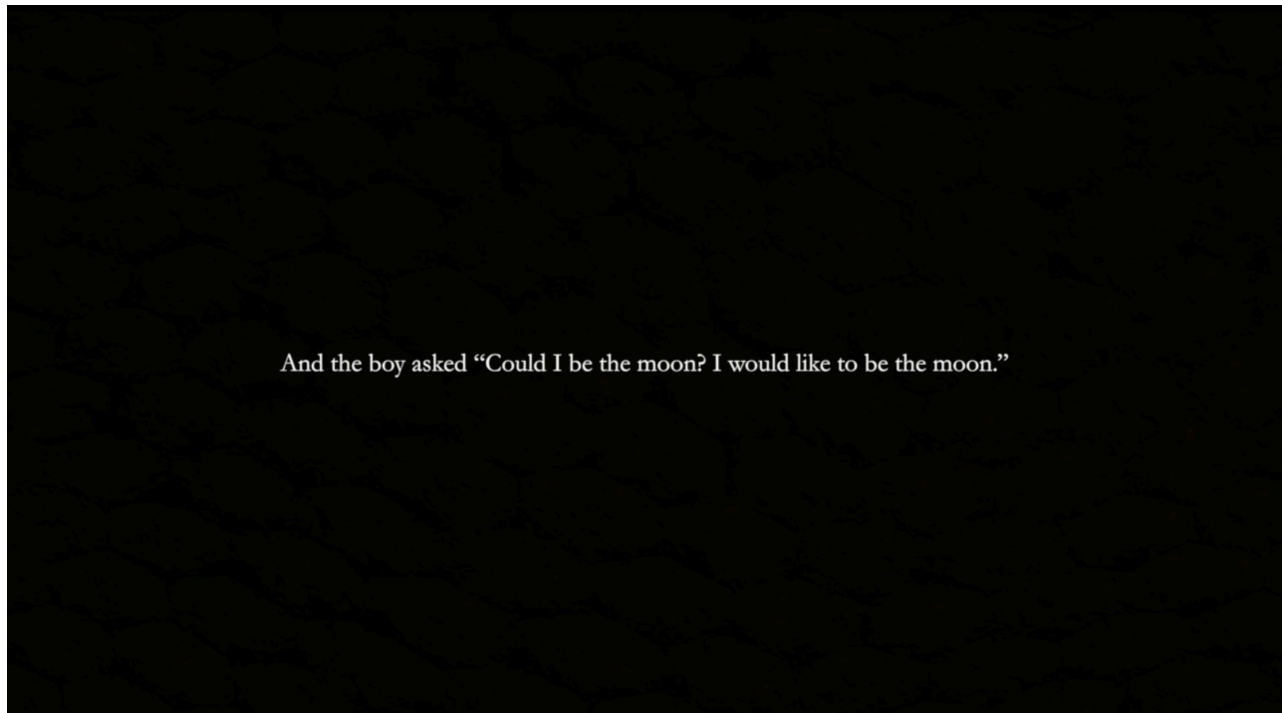


Figure 3: Caroline Yoo, *해님달님*, 2017, Work in Progress

In *Contemporary Asian America*, Min and Zhou explain that being American is not being simply being American but being white American. In the 1800s, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur described Americans as “either European or the descendant of Europeans” (Zhou 125). In 1914 Israel Zangwill “characterized an American as an ‘immaculate, well-dressed, accent-free Anglo’” (Zhou 125). In both descriptions, the American is established as white and that standard still holds true today.

When being American is thought of as white skinned, the white community is held up on a pedestal. They are the ones that are truly “normal” (Foucault 2) and the Asian and Asian American community, in attempting to be accepted as American, have recently began to align themselves with white Americans. There was a time when “Black and Asian Americans were equivalent and interchangeable,” yet now “it is common to refer to an ‘Anglo-Asian’ overclass in contrast to an African American-Hispanic underclass” (Wu 9). This becomes problematic as to

further accentuate their connection with White America, the Asian American and Asian community in the United States become oppressors against other minority groups and to other ethnic Asian populations, which is focused in *해님 달님* as well as *FOREIGNER*.

FOREIGNER is an multi-channel video installation made up of short films. Each film entails a person of Asian heritage, defined as having heritage no matter how small from a country of Asia, standing in front of a neon sign that states “Foreigner.” The participant simply stares into a camera for a minute and in the final installation, two short films will be going at the same time and after every minute, the person in front of the sign will change, showcasing how diverse the spectrum of being Asian can really be. In this way, this piece challenges East Asian dominance in the United States.



Figure 4: Caroline Yoo, *FOREIGNER*, 2017, Multi-channel video installation

In *FOREIGNER*, I am specifically tackling the East Asian/Asian American supremacy in the Asian American community. In the USA, the word “Asia” has now become synonymous with the area of East Asia – China, Japan, South Korea. This is in part due to when Asians started migrating to America, the first group to do so were the Japanese and the Chinese (Zhou 119). Even so, in modern day America, the term Asian is still synonymous with East Asia, which is extremely problematic as there are now populations from Southeast, South, and Middle Eastern Asia. Moreover as the meaning of Asia transforms into East Asia, the media and public begins to overlook other Asian communities because representation of East Asian/Asian Americans dominate what little representation there is of the Asian community.

The pieces, *Are you listening to me*, *혜님 딸님*, and *FOREIGNER* in “Other-ing,” works to examine how the Asian and Asian American community residing in the USA reflect and react to these racist embedded standards of Eurocentric views that have shaped the United States into a society where white is the premier. Sometime acting as the oppressed and the oppressor or both, my work does not shy away from topics that also implicate myself in this system.

In the first section, I emphasized my American side. I am unashamed and proud of the fact that I am a USA citizen and that English is my main language. Yet I am also extremely proud of my South Korean heritage, language, and culture as well. Nevertheless, accepting my duality does not mean that I am not a part of this system of white supremacy and systematic racism. I will be the first one to tell you that I was and probably still am a member of the structures of both the oppressed and oppressor in contemporary Asian America.

Even now, as I have come to an understanding of my stance subverting the United States’ stance on race, I am still human. I still make mistakes and sometimes I do reinforce these discriminatory notions. However to break this hierarchical racial structure, I feel that it is

necessary to take responsibility for these thoughts and actions that propagate bigotry, no matter how accidental the incident was. Art should implicate and engage to create a more equal relationship between the viewer and the work.

Becoming Active

Viewing artwork, presently, especially ones that are film or video, in the museum or the white cube gallery have become about a relationship of power. Sonia Tascon explains a similar idea in her book *Activist Film Festivals* when viewing activist film. She explores how when viewing activist film, the film becomes the victim and the viewer transforms into the savior (5). Tascon continues to state that viewing is “not a neutral activity” (4) – often the Western viewer having the privilege of spectating other people’s discomfort or suffering when watching activist films. Yet later in her book, Tascon believes that in “certain contexts,” an enhanced viewing “could encourage nuances outside the victim-savior mentality” (5). Although activist film is a different context than viewing film in the contemporary art world, I think that some theories may be reformed to explain the viewer relationship of time-based media pieces in the gallery/museum setting.

In these specified venues, the gallery and the museum, when viewing a time based media work, the spectator is the superior and the art is viewed and the inferior. The audience gazes at the work but if the artwork does not engage or implicate the viewer, the work is simply gazed at. The film becomes a piece where it is passive item that can be objectified and framed in any way. The art is unfolding but not affecting the viewer. However if the film piece implicates the viewer or disrupts expected norms, the piece becomes active. And in becoming more active, the artwork becomes a more equal viewing experience. By becoming active, the film transforms the “spectators into responsible historical subjects,” (Tascón 23) the audience members able to respond and be in dialogue with the art information conveyed.

A technique that is used throughout my pieces to engage the audience is the use of the gaze. The gaze of the subject can be a powerful tool to implicate and indicate that the viewer is an equal party in finishing the art.

Julian Rosefeldt's films are relevant as his most recent *Manifesto*, relies on the involvement of the spectator through the use of the gaze. *Manifesto* is a film installation of 13 different characters all played by Cate Blanchett. Blanchett acts out artist manifestos from the likes of Futurists to Fluxus in different settings. The installation is massive, 13 screens are in one open room, all playing at the same time. Each screen is at least double the height of a human. Each video is playing in sync and at one moment, all the characters look directly at the camera and proceed to recite a mantra. Because of the scale of the screens as well as the characters suddenly addressing the viewer, the film suddenly switches from a film that could be viewed as a spectator to an experience where the film is in dialogue with onlooker.

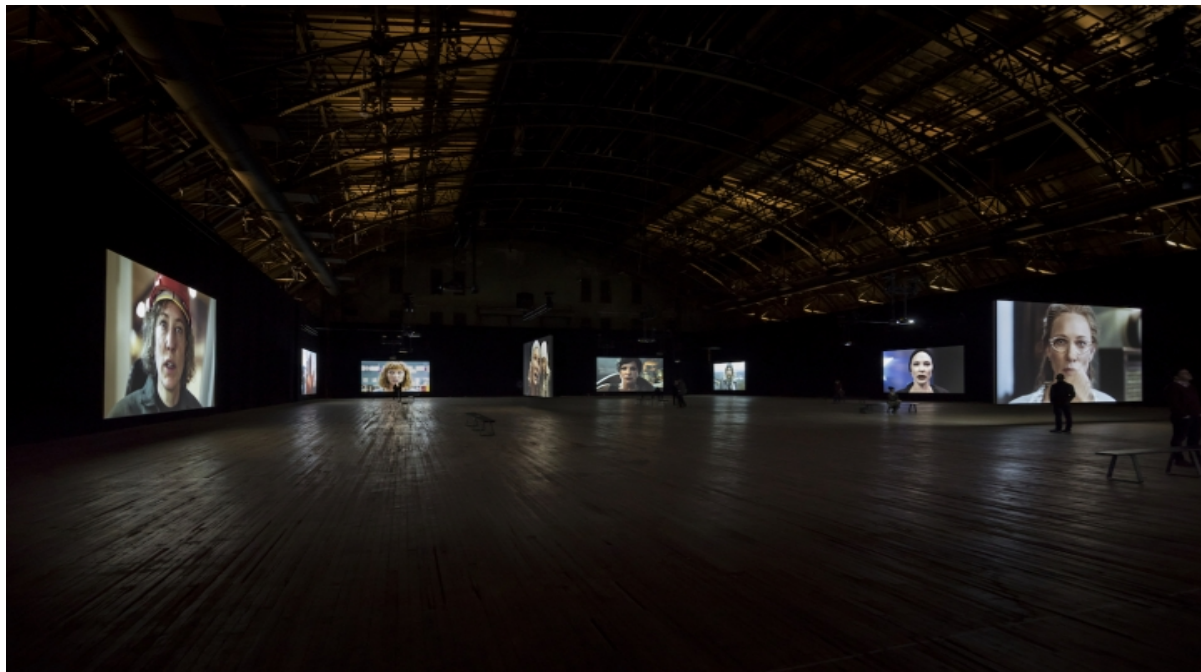


Figure 5: Julian Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*, 2015, 13 Channel video installation, <http://hyperallergic.com/346259/the-chameleonic-cate-blanchett-brings-20th-century-art-manifestos-to-life/>

Hye Yeon Nam similarly uses the gaze to implicate the audience as well as herself in *Gaze*. *Gaze* is projection of nine of Nam's eyeballs that are linked to a motion sensor so that the eyes follow the movement of the viewer in the room. This creates discomfort where the spectator becomes acutely aware of their position in space and relation to the artwork. This piece cannot be viewed without a viewer and the viewer becomes an essential part of the piece itself. In this way, *Gaze* does not play into victim-savior mentality that Tascon explained because the onlooker becomes just as important as the time-based work, and the art and the audience become equal players.

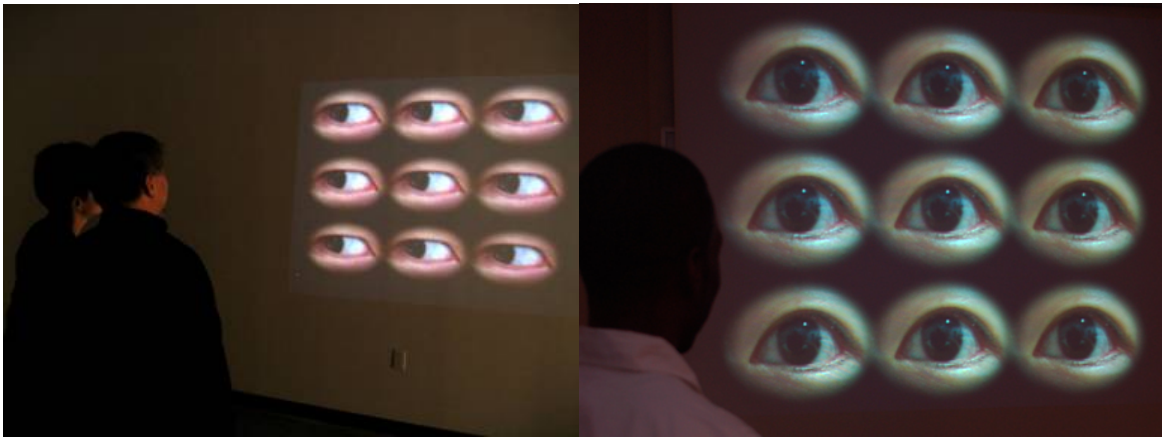


Figure 6: Hye Yeon Nam, *Gaze*, 2006, Interactive installation, <http://www.hynam.org/HY/gaz.html>

Facets of a Whole

In creating a perspective of a three-dimensional Asian American, “Other-ing,” is subverting this dominance of white America and its power over the Asian American community. However this three-dimensional perspective that I have been discussing is not created by one specific piece of mine but can only be produced when viewing all of my works together.

This is an idea that was inspired largely by Cheng Ran’s *Diary of a Madman*. His new media installation was a series of television screens all of different sizes that told the narrative of his retelling of the 1918 modern Chinese short story by Lu Xun’s *Diary of a Madman*. (Cheng Ran: Diary of a Madman). Each screen was a fragment of a whole and it was only when all of them were viewed together did one realize the complete picture. Nevertheless that did not mean that the storytelling was linear. Each video did not seem to have a beginning, middle, or end and sometimes there really was no link between one video and the next, yet each was a fragment of a whole that told one piece of the story.



Figure 7: Cheng Ran, *Diary of a Madman*, 2016, New media installation, <http://www.k11artfoundation.org/>

Similarly, all of my work has to be encountered in the context of one another to get the full perspective of the multi-layered, complex person of the three-dimensional Asian American view. One art piece cannot fathom to tell the whole story of my Asian American experience, and so each artwork is a layer or fragment of this three-dimensional perspective. Each individual art piece is a facet of a bigger whole.

Fluidity

Whether it is leveling platforms in the viewing experience or looking to dismantle racist tendencies in society, my art is in the end about moving towards equality. It is about demolishing white supremacy one step at a time and subverting the system that I was born into, in this Western thought dominated landscape. It is about creating a society that is no longer stuck in binaries and outdated colonial beliefs, but one based in fluidity in race, in art, in human relations. It is one that is unapologetic about showcasing topics that may seem taboo, in order to depict the human as truthfully as possible, in this specific case portraying the complex, multi-layered nature of being human, of being Asian American.

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Figure List

Figure 1: Caroline Yoo, *Are you listening to me?*, 2017, Short film, 4:49.

Figure 2: Caroline Yoo, *Are you listening to me?*, 2017, Short film, 4:49.

Figure 3: Caroline Yoo, *해님 달님*, 2017, Work in Progress, Film.

Figure 4: Caroline Yoo, *FOREIGNER*, 2017, Multi-channel video installation, 5:00.

Figure 5: Julian Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*, 2015, 13 Channel video installation, 130:00.

Figure 6: Hye Yeon Nam, *Gaze*, 2006, Interactive installation.

Figure 7: Cheng Ran, *Diary of a Madman*, 2016, New media installation.